

Larry Garber, Mission Director, USAID-West Bank/Gaza
Remarks at the “Quality Infrastructure” Conference
Best Eastern Hotel, Ramallah
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Your excellency Prime Minister Ahmad Qurei, your excellency Minister Maher Masri, Mr. Said Abuhijleh, Dr. Anwar El Tawil, Mazen Abu Sharia, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It is not every day that I am able to travel to Ramallah, but I made a special effort to join you today because this Quality Infrastructure conference, and the impetus that it hopefully will provide to the establishment of national regulations and standards, are absolutely essential for Palestinian participation in the global free-market economy and the multilateral trading system.

Quality infrastructure is critical to developing national economies, enhancing business competitiveness, and increasing access to global markets. It protects local consumers from imported products with low standards, while at the same time allows Palestinian products and services to compete internationally, facilitates trade and promotes inward investment.

USAID views quality standards as a cross-cutting issue and has integrated their use across the many sectors where we have ongoing activities in the West Bank and Gaza. In this regard, I would like to present four examples where USAID has contributed to Palestinian quality infrastructure – in the road, water, agriculture and the health sectors.

In December, we completed building and rehabilitating 69 kilometers of roads in communities throughout the West Bank and Gaza. We followed internationally recognized quality control and quality assurance guidelines. Before we even broke ground, our U.S. construction management team informed every Palestinian contractor on safety policies and procedures, according to the guidelines set by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration. And the Palestinian companies and laborers successfully implemented the project to rigorous international standards, prompting local officials to commit to integrating these standards into all future municipal construction projects.

In improving the quality and quantity of available water supplies, USAID has required use of internationally recognized standards in procuring basic steel pipes and plaster cisterns, as well as complex electrical controls for submersible pumps. We have trained Palestinians to manage these complex operations, according to the relevant standards. The result is improved water management and water quality for hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.

Working with our sister agency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, USAID is providing technical assistance to West Bank and Gaza agribusiness firms. This program serves to

improve food safety and post-harvest technologies and practices, and supports the development and application of policies and regulations that can be benchmarked to international standards. This will result in increased food security locally and access to new markets around the world.

Lastly, in the health sector, USAID is training healthcare providers on internationally accepted medical protocols that ensure standardized clinical practices, including maternal and child health services. The result will be the establishment of national guidelines regulated and approved by the Ministry of Health that will necessitate all four players in the health field – UNRWA, the private sector, Ministry of Health and the NGO sector – to conform to a set standard of healthcare delivery and better healthcare for all.

But now down to business at hand.

For the past five years, USAID has supported the development of socially responsible institutions that will serve as anchors and catalysts for a Palestinian national strategy of economic development. Some of the groups that have benefited from USAID assistance include: the Palestinian Standard Institution; the Palestinian Industrial Estates and Free Zone Authority; the Palestinian Federation of Industries; the Palestinian Investment Promotion Agency; and PalTrade.

Today, we celebrate the formation of a powerful business network among PSI, PalTrade and PFI to advocate and create competitive products and services. I am pleased that they are supported by the newly merged Ministry of National Economy. As you know, this Ministry is the product of three former ministries. During the past nine months, USAID has partnered with Minister Masri and his team to reengineer the Ministry and to create a comprehensive organizational structure that adheres to international best practices and reflects a commitment to institutional reform. This work positions the Ministry in a leadership role to set economic policy and, equally important, to deliver effective services to the private sector. We are quite pleased that the Cabinet has recently approved the reengineering effort and that the Minister has used this conference to announce his intention to move swiftly to the implementation phase.

The U.S. government recognizes the critical role of the Palestinian private sector in a future Palestinian state. In this context, senior officials from the U.S. State Department and Treasury Department met on February 22 with Palestinian leaders to inaugurate the Palestinian Economic Development Group as a forum for strategic planning about development of the Palestinian economy and the role of U.S. government assistance. As emerged from the discussions, adherence to international standards and practices, and a commitment to transparency and accountability, are among the shared goals of our two governments. Future meetings of the Group will focus on these issues.

For our part, USAID will continue to support these and other reform efforts and continue to employ innovative approaches to stimulating the private sector. And next time we meet, I hope we can celebrate Palestinian membership into the International Standards Organization.

Thank you.